DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 324 907 FL 018 781

AUTHOR Jones, Paul McClure
TITLE Knowing Opportunities: Some Possible Benefits and Limitations of Dialogue Journals in Adult Second Language Instruction.
PUB DATE Aug 88
NOTE 86p.; Requirement for master's degree, School for International Training, Vermont.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Master Theses (042)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Classroom Techniques; *Dialog Journals; *Error Correction; *Instructional Effectiveness; Interpersonal Communication; Second Language Instruction; Skill Development; Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

A discussion of the use of dialogue journals in second language instruction integrates research and personal teaching experience in an analysis of the technique's benefits and challenges. The first chapter reviews what dialogue journals are and how they differ from other teaching strategies. Their use in different adult education contexts are also examined. The second chapter outlines some possible benefits of dialogue journal writing for both students and teachers. It is argued that the method has significant power to affect teacher-student relationships, shape teacher and student attitudes, help students develop new language skills, and motivate and guide teachers. Several limitations and challenges in the use of dialogue journals are enumerated in chapter 3 including constraints on time, improvement of student second language accuracy, and improvement of writing skills. The importance of mutual trust and teacher patience in successful use of the genre are also discussed. Actual journal excerpts and student interview comments are used for illustration. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED324907

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
P. Jones
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

KNOWING OPPORTUNITIES:
SOME POSSIBLE BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF DIALOGUE JOURNALS IN ADULT SECOND LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

BY

PAUL MCCLURE JONES

A.B., BROWN UNIVERSITY 1978

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MASTER OF ARTS
IN TEACHING DEGREE AT THE
SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING

BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT

AUGUST, 1988

FL018481

This project by Paul M. Jones is accepted in its present form.

Date 29 August 1988

Project Advisor Patrick Moran

Project Reader Joy Peyton

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my advisor, Patrick Moran, for his untiring wisdom as a teacher and mentor; to my reader, Joy Kreeft Peyton, for her generous enthusiasm and commitment to widespread understanding of a complex subject; to Kathleen Wolf, my master teacher, who inspired me day after day and graciously collected much of the "data" used here; to Lise Sparrow, for clearing the path that led to this project; to Jana Staton, for opening new doors to the world of written dialogue; to Alex Silverman and Leonard Adkins, for talking with me, on paper, in French; to Pam Helmick, for sharing her class and her thoughts on dialogue journals; to the teachers and students at the School for International Training and the Experiment in International Living's ISE Program in Brattleboro who so graciously completed my questionnaires; and most of all, to the more than sixty students in Providence and San Francisco who let me into their lives through dialogue, and who gave permission for those dialogues to form part of this work. Thank you all.

Copyright © 1988 by Paul McClure Jones

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews what dialogue journals are and explores their possible benefits and limitations in adult second language teaching. The author integrates examples from his own use of journals with findings from interviews and surveys of teachers and students, and with reports from the literature.

Dialogue writing immerses students in meaningful use of the written language. It also engages student and teacher in an ongoing, non-hierarchical sharing of ideas. These features give the writing remarkable power to affect classroom relationships, to help shape teacher and student attitudes, and to help students acquire new language and writing skills. The journals can also serve as a useful planning and assessment tool for teachers.

Like any technique, dialogue journals also have limitations. Time constraints, improving student accuracy in the second language, and comprehensively improving writing skills are discussed as challenges to be addressed creatively. The paper also examines the importance of mutual trust and teacher patience to successful use of the genre.

ERIC Descriptors:

Adult Education, Dialogue, Interpersonal Communication, Second Language Instruction, Teaching Methods, Teacher Student Relationship, Writing Instruction, Written Language

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE. WHAT ARE DIALOGUE JOURNALS? 7

THE BASIC INGREDIENTS 7

QUALITIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE 9

Focus on communication. 11
Non-threatening. 11
High-interest. 12
Equality in the interaction. 12
Functional. 13
Evolving over time 14

DIFFERENT CONTEXTS: ADAPTING TO DIVERSITY 15

CONCLUSION 17

CHAPTER TWO. WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF DIALOGUE JOURNALS? 19

FOSTER NEW COMMUNICATION, RAPPORT AND UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS. . . . 20

SOME BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS. 24

Promoting changes in attitudes. 25

Improving reading and writing skills. 28

Improving second language reading skills 29
Building fluency in writing. 30
Building a bridge to academic writing. . 33

Promoting the learning or acquisition of the forms and syntax of the written language . 34

Discussing and solving problems 39

Making referrals 43

SOME BENEFITS FOR TEACHERS 46

Individualizing instruction 46

Planning lessons and courses 53

Teaching the teacher 54

Growing through writing 56

Inspiring the teacher 58

CHAPTER THREE. WHERE DO DIALOGUE JOURNALS FIT IN? SOME CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS 60

TIME CONSTRAINTS 61

ACCURACY AND ERROR CORRECTION 63

THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE JOURNALS IN THE TEACHING OF "WRITING". 67

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST 69

KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN--THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER PATIENCE 71

CONCLUSION 74

BIBLIOGRAPHY 76

FIGURE 1. Examples of student translations of new vocabulary in their teacher's journals . 36

FIGURE 2. Problem sharing between Alicia and her teacher, Kathleen 41

The time has come, the Walrus said,
to talk of many things...

--Lewis Carroll

INTRODUCTION

I first heard about dialogue journals, notebooks in which teacher and students "converse" in writing, in Providence, Rhode Island. It was 1986, and I was teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at night to immigrant adults. Intrigued by the notion of writing back and forth freely with my students, I decided to give the technique a try.

I was soon struck by their writing. One woman described at length her upbringing on a farm in northern Poland. She wrote of her love for animals and about her grandfather, who took in wounded birds and nursed them back to health. One day I asked how she'd come to the U.S. She explained that she'd arrived as a tourist four years earlier, to visit friends for a few months. Just before she was to go back, the Solidarity uprising broke out. Word was sent for her not to return. She overstayed her visa, eventually getting a minimum wage factory job. Two months became two years. Being illegal, she couldn't change her job or go to school. Her father in Poland got suddenly ill and died. Still she couldn't return. Now, she wrote, she belonged nowhere. Her life had been a superhighway. She'd gotten off at the wrong exit, and there was no way to get back on.

This woman rarely spoke in class, and expressed frequent doubts about her English, yet she wrote with remarkable power. And she was not alone. I was deeply impressed by many others' ability to converse on paper as well. In the process, the students and I were getting to know each other in entirely new ways.

These little notebooks were seducing me, but this made me wary. I didn't want to commit myself or my students to such an involved process merely out of infatuation. Were they really learning anything? Was I?

A year later, during my teaching internship in San Francisco, I decided to try the technique with another adult ESL class, this time with beginners. I asked them to write in dialogue journals three times a week, during class. Most of these students, all immigrants and refugees, had never written in English other than to fill out a form. Most had done little or no reading in English, either. Yet whenever I handed out their journals, a palpable silence filled the room as students devoured my entries and then wrote intently for as long as half an hour. I was hooked.

SEEKING MORE UNDERSTANDING

Wanting more than ever to understand the impact of this compelling technique, I sought out what scholars had to say. I was surprised to find a large literature addressing many dimensions of dialogue journals. Jana Staton and Joy Kreeft Peyton, who have written or compiled much of the available

work, were wonderfully helpful and patient in giving me access to that research.

The literature made clearer some of the unique attributes and benefits of dialogue writing. Most of the analytic research on dialogue journals in language teaching, however, was based on their use with elementary school ESL students. Since I was interested in their impact with adults, I found myself having to extrapolate from the reading, based partly on my own assumptions about how adults differ from children, and drawing heavily on my own limited experience with adult ESL students.

I sought additional perspectives, pertinent to adult language teaching. Bearing in mind Montaigne's advice that physicians should first catch the pox if they want to cure it, I decided to explore the technique as a student. I enrolled in beginning French, and asked my teacher and two other French professors to keep dialogue journals with me in that language. The journals' power was confirmed in a new light, as I found myself driving the ten miles to campus on weekends and evenings just to see what new mysteries of this intruiging language might be waiting in my box. Responding in French made me excited and proud. And doing the journals, I was convinced, was teaching me a tremendous amount of French. At the same time, I struggled with frustration over not having my errors corrected, and began

to confront some of the genre's limitations from a student's point of view.

In May of 1988, I added two more pieces to the growing puzzle. First, I surveyed fifty-seven ESL, French and Spanish teachers and teacher trainers at the School for International Training on their past use of dialogue journals. I then conducted a two-month longitudinal survey, using pre- and post-program questionnaires and personal interviews, of one teacher and eight adult ESL students at the Experiment in International Living's International Students of English (ISE) Program. In both surveys, I focused on the positive value and the pitfalls that these teachers and students perceived in dialogue writing.

METHODS TO MADNESS--MY PURPOSE AND APPROACH IN THIS PAPER

This paper is my attempt to weave these experiences into a meaningful whole, and to answer the question: "What are some possible benefits and limitations of dialogue journals in adult language teaching?" It is written for adult language teachers, both those new to the field and those with some experience, who want to learn more about the role that the journals might play in their teaching.

Other authors have written on the practical aspects of dialogue journal writing (Staton 1987; Peyton and Reed 1987). My aim here, in contrast, is more the "why" of dialogue writing than the "how"; to explore what it is that

inspires a growing number of language teachers to sit day after day, patiently and thoughtfully writing to each student in these little notebooks. At the same time, I hope to convey a realistic sense of the challenges likely to confront a teacher who decides, as I did in 1986, to "give dialogue journals a try".

I will begin, in Chapter One, ("What are Dialogue Journals?") by reviewing what dialogue journals are and how they differ from other teaching strategies. I'll also describe briefly the different adult second language contexts for their use. In Chapter Two ("What are the Possible Benefits of Dialogue Journals?") I will examine some possible benefits of dialogue writing for both students and teachers. As I'll show, dialogue writing has remarkable power to affect teacher-student relationships, to help shape teacher and student attitudes, and to help students develop new writing and language skills. The journals can also help motivate and guide teachers in many aspects of their work.

Like any technique, dialogue journals also have their limitations, which I'll discuss in Chapter Three ("Where do Dialogue Journals Fit In? Some Challenges and Limitations"). Time constraints, improving student accuracy in the second language, and comprehensively improving writing skills are all challenges to be addressed creatively. I'll also examine the importance of mutual trust and teacher patience to successful use of the genre.

As I go along, I will integrate examples from my own teaching, learning and research with findings from the literature. The journal excerpts presented are from those I kept with my own adult ESL students or those of Kathleen Wolf, my master teacher at Alemany Community College. All excerpts and interview comments are included with permission from the authors. Names have been changed and certain information omitted to protect the writers' identities.

In the spirit of my subject, I try in this paper to remain conversational. The prose isn't formal, nor is the organization strictly academic. My aim is to give readers a taste of what dialogue writing is all about, while sharing my sense of both the power and the limitations of this remarkably flexible technique.

I began this project in the hope that understanding better what dialogue journals might accomplish would enable me to use them more wisely. I now hope that this project can inspire others to pursue the rich opportunities that come through talking, on paper, with their students.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT ARE DIALOGUE JOURNALS?

Dialogue journals are essentially written conversations between a student and teacher, usually kept in a bound notebook. Both partners write back and forth, frequently and over a period of months, about whatever interests them. Their goal is to communicate in writing, to exchange ideas and information free of the shackles that concern for form so often imposes on developing writers.

In this chapter, I'll review briefly the basic ingredients that distinguish dialogue journals from other forms of scholastic writing, and then look at some more complex qualities that give the genre its unique power as a teaching tool. Finally, I'll describe the diverse contexts in which dialogue journals can be used to help teach second languages to adults.

THE BASIC INGREDIENTS

The name "dialogue journal" was coined in 1979 by educational psychologist Jana Staton and sixth grade teacher Leslee Reed to describe Mrs. Reed's practice of writing freely back and forth, every day, with each of her students (Staton and Peyton 1986). Since then, and as the practice

has become more widespread, linguists and educators have identified several essential ingredients that distinguish dialogue journals from other kinds of writing.

First, dialogue journals are interactive. Teacher and student take equal turns responding. Both partners write frequently, usually between one and three times weekly with adult students. And the writing is sustained for anywhere from several months to a year, typically for the duration of a course (Kreeft, Staton and Gutstein 1984).

Topics are not assigned, leaving both participants free to discuss whatever they wish. The interaction thus becomes largely student-generated. In some content-based or advanced language courses, students may be asked to address topics somehow related to course content. Within that broad guideline, however, they still have complete freedom to initiate, abandon, or expand on any topics they choose.

As a rule, dialogue journals are not corrected, nor are they graded or evaluated. The absence of overt corrections is central to the creation of a genuine dialogue, yet it raises some thorny issues with adult language students, related to accurate learning of the forms of a new language. I will examine these issues in some detail in Chapter Three (Challenges and Limitations).

Most teachers keep the writing private, promising not to show a journal to any third party without the student's

consent, and then generally only for research purposes, maintaining strict anonymity.

Finally, the dialogue is preserved in some tangible, durable form that gives both writers ongoing access to all that has transpired thus far. Although bound notebooks are most often used, other forms, such as computer disks, are also possible. Unlike oral conversations, dialogue journals thus allow participants time to read, re-read and reflect on what has been said previously before responding (Kreeft, Staton, and Gutstein 1984).

QUALITIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The basic ground rules of dialogue journal writing--that the writing be interactive, frequent, sustained, open-ended, not corrected, private, and somehow durable and accessible--set the stage for five more complex qualities that characterize many, if not all, dialogue journals. These five qualities, I believe, set the genre apart dramatically from other kinds of scholastic writing and classroom interaction, and give the genre its compelling power as a teaching tool.

First, the focus of the interaction is on real communication, as opposed to form. Second, along with the privacy of the writing, the absence of corrections makes dialogue journals relatively non-threatening to most students. Third, because the journals are individualized

and largely student-generated, they can capture and sustain remarkably high student interest. Fourth, teacher and student can act as relatively equal partners in the discourse, temporarily stepping out of their customarily hierarchical relationship. Finally, the genre encourages students to express in writing a wide variety of language functions, such as reporting facts, making requests, complaining, giving excuses, predicting, and so on (Kreeft et al 1984; Staton et al 1988).

The interplay of these qualities is illustrated clearly in the dialogue journal writing of Nguyen Hang, one of my beginning ESL students in her early twenties. The following are the first three complete turns (student entry plus teacher response) from her journal, which we began three weeks into the semester:

Jan 26 **Dear Paul;**
How are you Paul. I am a student. I am from Vietnam and my family have Five people. good bay Paul Nguyen Hang

Dear Nguyen,
Thank you for your letter! You have a big family! I saw you in the morning before school with your children, on Eddy St. You have a nice family. I am not married, but I have a nice family. My sister and my parents live in San Francisco.
Sincerely, Paul

Jan 27 **Dear Paul,**
I am very happy thank you for Paul. When you saw me on the eddy st. but, I don't know you. thank you for your. good bay Paul.
Nguyen Hang

Dear Nguyen
When I saw you on Eddy street, I was driving my car, so you could not see me. But you were walking, so I could see you. What are your children's names?
Sincerely, Paul

Jan 28 Dear Paul
Where are you going You saw me on Eddy Street. Hello Paul. You want know my family name. First Son _____. Second Son_____. and theeth my daughter name is _____. Good night. Paul see you again see you again Nguyen Hang

Dear Nguyen,
I was coming to school at about 7:30 in the morning when I saw you walking with your children, on Eddy St., near Van Ness St.
Sincerely, Paul

Focus on communication. In these entries Nguyen talks about herself and her family, and then enters into an extended discussion about when, where, and why I saw them on the street. There are errors, such as the absence of punctuation for questions or certain past tense verb forms, but they do not hinder the flow of the discussion. What counts is the message, and it gets across. Similarly, my question to Nguyen ("What are your children's names?") is real. I am seeking information that I honestly don't know and am interested in, rather than simply trying to elicit correct usage of a particular grammatical structure.

Non-threatening. Nguyen was a shy student, rarely venturing to speak during the first month of class. In these initial entries to her dialogue journal, however, she opened up right away. Unlike some classroom activities from

which she held back, the journal was clearly non-threatening to her.

High-interest. The major topic in these entries, families, was initiated by Nguyen. The other major subject, my morning sighting of Nguyen and her family, grew out of my attempt to ask about her family. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the dialogue journal consistently captured Nguyen's interest; she eagerly read and wrote in her journal every time it was given to her. As the semester progressed, she took obvious delight in telling me about her family and in particular about her newborn daughter, Mary, all subjects of great personal significance. She seemed equally interested in asking me and Kathleen, the other teacher, questions of a somewhat personal nature.

Equality in the interaction. There is a striking equality in my "dialogue" with Nguyen that seems radically different from a traditional, hierarchical teacher-student relationship. It looks almost like an initial chat between two newly acquainted peers. Each of us talks about ourselves and asks questions about the other. In fact, Nguyen here asks three questions to my one. During class, in contrast, Nguyen adopted a traditional student role, never asking me questions and rarely discussing personal information, except as part of a planned class activity.

This dramatic shift to a relatively equal status in discourse is one of the most striking dimensions of written

dialogue. As linguist Robby Morroy has stated, the teacher seems to "camouflage her authority" to promote honest communication (Morroy 1985, 62). Jana Staton and her collaborators in the first major study of dialogue journals noted that through this equality, the teacher "shares the power to get things done in the classroom through writing with her students" (Staton et al 88, 4). This equality, which also allows students to get to know their teacher as another human being rather than as an authority figure, certainly contributes to the journals' captivating power.

Functional. In these brief entries, Nguyen's writing demonstrates a variety of communicative purposes, or what some sociolinguists call "language functions" (Staton et al 1988, 107). These include reporting personal facts ("I am a student"), responding to questions ("You want know my family name. First son ..."), requesting information ("Where are you going You saw me on Eddy St."), and thanking ("thank you for you"). In subsequent entries, her writing exhibited a great many other functions as well, such as giving opinions ("I like San Francisco..night times very beautiful"); giving excuses ("I at home because my son sick"); expressing desires ("I am very like a dryer") and complaints ("but I don't have a room keep a dryer"), and evaluating ("Kathleen...you be my teacher very excellent, gave me know a lot many many thing"). Sociolinguist Roger Shuy has analyzed the language functions in the dialogue writing of

numerous children, and found at least fifteen major recurring language functions typical of the genre, including (in addition to those illustrated here): giving directives, apologizing, offering, predicting, and reporting and requesting various categories of information (Shuy 1988, 110).

Evolving over time. Dialogue journal writing differs from oral conversation in that both participants have ample time to think about what they want to say between turns, and to review what's already been said before responding. On the other hand, the interaction resembles spoken conversation in several ways. As in talks between friends, topics can run the gamut from mundane factual matters to more involved personal, political or philosophical issues, depending on both participants' interests. Over several months following the initial entries shown above, for instance, the dialogue in Nguyen's journal ranged over such subjects as families, household life, food, Chinese and American holidays, San Francisco, work, movies, and dentists. And although Nguyen's initial writing tended to be reportorial, over time she increasingly expressed feelings and opinions as well. Likewise, Staton and others (1988) have found that written dialogue, like oral conversation between new friends, tends to evolve in stages, beginning with relatively simple, factual subjects and moving on eventually to greater intimacy and sharing. I

will explore one dimension of that evolution towards more personal and open writing--discussing problems--in more detail in Chapter Two.

DIFFERENT CONTEXTS: ADAPTING TO DIVERSITY

Dialogue journals are used in all kinds of language teaching, yet they are by no means confined to that field. Essentially any teacher who wants to communicate individually in writing with his or her students can adapt the technique. Their first reported use was with native-English speaking sixth graders (Staton and Peyton 1986, 1). Besides ESL and foreign language instruction, they can also be found today in mainstream (non-language) classes from elementary through high school, deaf student education, and college and graduate courses, notably in education and linguistics (Michael 1982). In all fields, they are used with students of all ages, from first graders through adults.

Dialogue journals are well suited to virtually every variety of adult language teaching.[1] They are used in ESL programs serving immigrants and refugees, college and graduate-level ESL courses for foreign students, and private language institutes for visiting foreign students of English

[1]Since this paper is concerned primarily with their role in adult language instruction, interested readers are referred to works by Kreeft et al (1984), Hall and Duffy (1987) and Peyton (1986) for further information dealing directly with younger students.

(EFL). They are also used in a variety of overseas English language programs (Staton, Peyton & Gutstein 1988), and can be used to help teach virtually any foreign language in college, graduate school, and other language programs. The technique is employed successfully at all proficiency levels, from beginning through advanced language instruction. While most often used with entire classes, dialogue journals can also be adapted to individual instruction and tutoring. Linguists Diane Poole and Judi Lynn Anderson, for instance, have used them successfully with their language associate to learn and teach Chinantec, an Indian language spoken in Oaxaca, Mexico (Poole, 1988).

In a recent (1988) survey at the Experiment in International Living in Vermont, I found that all but one member of the ESL faculty were using or had used dialogue journals with visiting international students. Moreover, half of the faculty and a quarter of the students in the Experiment's Master of Arts in Teaching program had used dialogue journals to teach ESL, French, or Spanish. Of these, over eighty percent said that they intended to use them in the future.

No one knows for sure (or has even estimated) how many teachers nationwide use the technique today. It would be interesting to find out. The number is probably quite large, however, judging in part by the hundreds of reports on their use in the literature and by their ever growing

popularity as a subject of presentations at TESOL[1] conferences.

CONCLUSION

The five qualities demonstrated earlier in Nguyen's journal entries, and consistently documented in the genre by linguists and educators (Kreeft et al 1984; Staton et al 1988), stand in stark contrast to much of traditional scholastic writing, which tends to be more teacher-generated, less consistently interesting to a wide variety of students, and more heavily concerned with form and linguistic accuracy (Elbow 1985).

But dialogue journals are more than simply an alternative to scholastic writing. They involve student and teacher in an ongoing, non-hierarchical sharing of ideas that is usually meaningful and often captivating. Over time, as in spoken conversations, the dialogue tends to evolve from simple, impersonal subjects to more complex, sometimes personal themes.

We'll see in the following chapter that these qualities give dialogue journals remarkable power to affect classroom relationships, to help shape teacher and student attitudes, and to foster in students the development of new language and writing skills. They can also serve as a useful

---

[1]Teachers of English as a Second Language, a worldwide organization that sponsors regular international, regional and local conferences.

planning and assessment tool for teachers, and can even inspire and motivate teachers in their classroom teaching.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF DIALOGUE JOURNALS?

Dialogue writing can benefit both students and teachers in many ways. In this chapter I'll discuss some of those benefits, first in the realm of student-teacher relationships, and then turning separately to specific benefits for students and teachers.

Dialogue journals offer no guarantees, of course. But if done with commitment and openness, they provide tremendous opportunities for new growth and learning to both participants. As I'll discuss first, the writing enables students and teachers to get to know each other in entirely new ways, often leading to greater rapport and mutual understanding. This potential to foster stronger relationships is perhaps the most compelling and captivating feature of dialogue writing.

For students in particular, the writing can lead to significant changes in attitudes that may affect their learning. It can also promote improvement of second language reading and writing skills, and may help students acquire the written forms and syntax of a new language. In many cases, students can also use the journals as a forum in which to discuss and solve problems.

Teachers stand to gain as well from the interaction. The journals can be a powerful tool both for individualizing

instruction and for planning lessons. Dialogue writing can also teach teachers a great deal about other cultures, and may help them to improve their own writing, much as they do for students. Finally, dialogue journals can at times be inspirational to teachers, bringing or renewing meaning and joy to their work in the classroom.

Let's begin by looking at the heart of what goes on in the classroom--student teacher relationships--and at how those relationships may be affected by dialogue writing.

FOSTER NEW COMMUNICATION, RAPPORT AND UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Dialogue journals enable teacher and student to get to know each other in ways that simply aren't possible otherwise. They do this, in the words of Joy Peyton and Leslee Reed, by opening "an entirely new channel of communication" (Peyton and Reed 1987).

In class there is rarely sufficient time to talk to each student regularly or in much depth. Moreover, students may be embarrassed or afraid to speak openly with a teacher in front of others. The journals can change all that. Carmen, an advanced ESL student from Mexico, explained how during an interview:

> I like writing back and forth to the teacher a lot. Since I'm not very sure of myself to talk, I get nervous and don't talk much in class. On paper I find it easier to express myself. I know her, I can ask her questions, I like it. I feel that the student and the teacher get closer that way.

The practice also enables less reticent, even agressive students to exchange ideas at length with the teacher, without dominating limited class time.

ESL students in this country often have limited contact with Americans. This is particularly true for immigrants and refugees, whose boss or landlord may be the only native English speaker with whom they deal regularly. Through the journals, their ESL teacher may become the first American with whom they can communicate openly and positively in ongoing fashion. Looking back on the semester, Carmen added:

> ... there were times when I don't have anyone here to talk to, so I could say many things--like a purging of things inside..

Such openness can benefit teachers as much as students. As Kathy, a young ESL instructor, explains:

> I learned a lot about the psychological states of students who were struggling with or adapting to North American culture and I used these insights in my teaching. I became more sensitive to what was taking place inside the students.

As most of us know from our own lives, open communication with others can lead to stronger, closer relationships. Another student in her late twenties, Ting, enrolled in an ESL class shortly after coming to San Francisco from China with her new husband and his family. She was experiencing considerable difficulty adjusting to life here. In class she was extremely reserved and polite, never volunteering to speak. Her journal writing was

initially hesitant and impersonal, but over time she began to open up, as can be seen from these later journal entries:

April 7 **Dear Kathleen, Thank you! My husband worry about me. Because I came to S.F. I always was a little homesick. He often tells me he will takes me go back visit my father, mother and sisters next years. I hope so.**

I often write letters to my mother. I telled her about my family in S.F. And about school. I have new friends here. But I miss them in China. Sometimes I was homesick and I cry a little. I very miss my mother.

Dear Ting, I remember the first time I was far away from my mother and father. I was very homesick and I cried a lot. I'm happy that I had such nice parents. They "were" my mother and father. They changed into my friends. Next time you write to your mother, tell her hello for me.

April 11 **Dear Kathleen, Thank you! My mother must thank you for you. I think you are a good teacher, a good wife and a good mother. Over the weekend you worked in the garden, and cooked etc. On the weekend I visited my sister in law. I went out with my husband for lunch. We went shopping bought something. Then we went home watches Chinese program TV.**

Dear Ting, I think you are a good wife, too. I know you are a good student. I think you probably do everything perfectly.

April 12 **Dear Kathleen, Thank you, Kathleen! I don't know how do I write the letter. This morning I got up at 6:45. Now I feel a little tired. Because last night I went to bed late about 1 am. What time did you get up this morning?**

Dear Ting, Sorry you feel so tired. It's hard to study when you feel tired. You know how to write letters very well. Your letters are always interesting. I love to read them. I get up at about 5:45. I love to get up early.

Ting and Kathleen's written dialogue grew slowly into a real friendship. One day Ting asked Kathleen "Can you tell me about your son?" Kathleen did, and next to her entry, her son Franz scrawled "Hi, ling, I am very busy with my homework." Thus began a dialogue within a dialogue, with Franz and Ting "piggybacking" notes to each other onto Kathleen and Ting's correspondence, even though they never met in person. It went on for weeks. At the end of the semester, Ting wrote:

> Dear Kathleen, Yes, this is the end of the semster. I'm unhappy. Because you'll leave us. I enjoyed in the class. You are a wonderful teacher. Also, I'm happy, we are friends.
>
> I don't know how to write this letter. THanks for your teach and help me. You are my good teacher and a good friend. I hop I will see you soon. And we often have coffee or tea in future. And I hope it soon coming.
>
> I hope your family have a nice summer. Please remember me to your son!

To be sure, dialogue journals don't always lead to close friendships. They rarely fail, however, to expand and deepen communication between teacher and student, and usually enable both parties at the very least to view each other with new understanding and respect.

Lasting attachments of one sort or another between teachers and students who write in journals are not that uncommon. As another teacher told me:

> I still correspond with students and feel that attachment (and subesquent writing) is a <u>direct</u> outgrowth of our 'written dialogues' during their time here.

Leslee Reed, who has taught with dialogue journals for roughly twenty years, sums up the interpersonal benefits that are possible in this way:

> I would like for everyone to see the love that goes into the journals, not just on my part, but on the children's part, too. The love, the respect, the mutuality of goals, the feelings that we develop for each other....Every year, the last week of school, I think I will never do journals again because I end up being rather tearful, and I don't want to say goodbye...And yet,...this, too, is a growing experience. I think any teacher who allows herself to get this involved with individuals can't help but be enriched by just learning about each child.
>
> The feeling that I care for you and you care for me has to be there; it has to be there in school. The people who say that a good teacher doesn't get emotionally involved with students are missing something very important. The first step is to be warm, personal and friendly--you have to be emotionally involved with those whom you work and those whom you teach. You have to love them, each one of them. (Staton et al 1988, 71)

SOME BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS

> Conversation is the laboratory and workshop of the student.
>
> --Ralph Waldo Emerson

Obviously, no two individuals will be affected by the writing in precisely the same way, and some may not be perceptably affected at all. In general, however, I see at least four possible ways that adult language students can benefit: First, doing dialogue journals can promote changes in student attitudes towards the second language, towards school, and towards self. Second, the practice can help

students improve their reading and writing abilties in the new language. Third, dialogue writing may promote the acquisition of the forms and syntax of the written language. And finally, exchanging information and opinions with the teacher may help students solve problems both in and out of school.

Promoting Changes in Attitudes

Perhaps the most striking benefit of dialogue writing is its ability to help adults overcome their fear of writing in a second language, and increase their self-confidence and willingness to write. This is no mean feat. For many of us, learning to write is a challenge frought with frustration and fear, even in our native language. Yet what Jerome Bruner has called "the daunting vastness of a blank page and the inherent terror that it evokes for the novice writer" (Bruner 1988) can appear that much worse when the writing is in a new language.

Dialogue journals offer a path through that fear by allowing students to write about things meaningful to them in a non-evaluated, non-threatening context (Shuy 1980). Many students who initially feel hesitant or afraid to write in a second language find, often to their surprise, that they actually enjoy writing back and forth with their teacher. Pretty soon, perhaps without realizing it, they've developed the confidence that comes from having done something new, and having done it well. I've found this

consistently in my own teaching, in my surveys of students, and in articles by other researchers (Kreeft 1983).

The effect can be dramatic. Maria, an advanced ESL student whose native language was Spanish, puts it clearly:

> When I look at my journal I feel good just to see that I have a lot of pages written in English. That makes me feel--Oh, Wow! I feel good. It seems--I can't believe that--they are mine. I feel more confident about writing in English now than I did before.
>
> The biggest thing is that I lost my fear of writing in English.

Written dialogue may open the door to greater willingness to participate in all aspects of a class. Zhi Tian, a Chinese student of mine in her late twenties, was often late to class and resisted participating in group activities. She seemed taciturn and even rude with her fellow students. Her first journal entry contained an apology.

> Dear Paul, Yesterday. I'm tired. I'm not to school. I'm sorry. I live to school English.

As the dialogue progressed, Zhi Tian told me about her family, her work, and her feelings about being in America. She also took frequent advantage of the opportunity to ask me questions, probably the first time she had ever done so with a teacher. Here are a few examples:

> Where are you from? Is your family here in San Francisco? Are you life to school?
>
> How many sisters do you have? Do you like fortune cookies?
>
> I like American food! I like to cook. Do you like CHinese? Do you like to be Chinese friend?

As the dialogue unfolded, her behavior in class changed. She began to come on time and participate more willingly. While I can't prove that the dialogue journal caused these changes, it seemed to play a major role.

Some researchers believe that the interaction may help increase students' motivation not only to write, but more generally to study a second language and go to school. In a study of deaf students' enrollment in preparatory English language classes at Galludet University, Jana Staton (1985) found that students whose instructors used dialogue journals were twice as likely to re-enroll for subsequent English classes as students who didn't keep the journals. Kathleen Wolf noticed something similar at Alemany College in San Francisco, where students are routinely promoted into more advanced classes as less proficient students arrive. During her first time using dialogue journals there, Wolf found that five students whom she wanted to transfer up adamantly refused to leave. When asked why, they said they did not want to stop writing in their notebooks (personal communication). While factors other than the journal writing, such as teacher personality, may well have played a role in both occurences, there is no doubt that the writing is often perceived very positively by students.

It may well enhance motivation to study. That was certainly the case for me as a student. Learning French for the first time, I found that journal writing virtually

transformed my willingness to study the language. My course was not intensive, meeting only four hours per week, and we had no assigned homework. At first I tried to study the grammar on my own, but found that discipline difficult to sustain and soon quit. Once I began dialogue writing, however, I started to spend two or three hours a night writing in French. Much of that time was spent looking up words, verb tenses, and grammatical explanations for things I wanted to say.

Improving Reading and Writing Skills

Most adult ESL programs in this country today, particularly those serving immigrants and refugees, are heavily focused on oral skills. All too few students get the instruction and practice they need to improve their mastery of the written language. Part of the problem is that few instructors feel prepared to teach reading or writing. Many don't know where to start.

Dialogue journals can help address this problem in several ways. First, dialogue writing gives students extensive practice reading comprehensible texts in the new language. Second, it can help students build fluency in writing. And third, dialogue writing can help students begin to develop skills useful in more formal academic writing (Kreeft, 1984; Kreeft, Staton, Richardson, and Wolfram 1988). Moreover, the journals are relatively easy

to use and to integrate into existing teaching approaches. I'll now consider each of these benefits more closely.

Improving Second Language Reading Skills. It's wonderful to watch my students whenever I hand out their dialogue journals during class. Desks are pulled apart, heads go down, and the room grows palpably silent as they devour my latest entries.

Doing dialogue journals immerses students in frequent reading in the second language. Unlike many assigned texts, teacher entries are personalized and usually comprehensible. If something isn't clear, students can ask for clarification or else respond in such a way that unveils the misunderstanding, allowing the teacher to clarify. Many adult students are, to say the least, apprehensive about reading in a second language, be it English, Chinese, or French. Within weeks of doing journals, that fear can seem to melt away. Best of all, the confidence and facility that develop through doing journals can stay with students, preparing them to go on successfully to a wide variety of other texts.

I have seen this time and again with my students, but it hit me most dramatically in my own study of French. I had never read anything in French before my first beginning class. Since the class dealt exclusively with oral skills, the only reading I did was through my dialogue journal, several times a week. After the course ended, I began

regular correspondence with several friends in French, and I started reading "The Little Prince", by St. Exupery. I now feel able to read basic texts in that language, all thanks to dialogue writing.

Jana Staton has explored a bit further the question of how dialogue journals compare to published texts as a way to build reading skills. In an interesting pilot study, she compared a teacher's dialogue journal entries with one student to a basal reader used by that student in the same class (Staton 1985a). She found that the journal entries were both linguistically more complex and cognitively more demanding than the basal reader, with more complex relationships between ideas, requiring greater inferencing and synthesis of information. Since this analysis was based on only one journal, more studies are needed. It seems clear, however, that dialogue journals afford most teachers a relatively simple way of breaking the reading barrier and of building skills that can help prepare students to go on to a wide variety of other texts.

Building Fluency in Writing. I once heard a high school ESL teacher make the following remark:

> "Dialogue journals? Oh, yeah, I've heard of that. I call it 'writing for fluency'."

The notion that dialogue writing builds fluency in writing has almost become a truism among teachers more or less familiar with the genre. Before we can really examine the concept, however, we should be clear about what it means,

for "fluency" is a bit like "critical thinking"--an oft-wielded, not so often understood term that seems somehow to elude precise definition.

In lay terms, I think of fluency as the ability to communicate fairly effectively and with ease. Linguist Shelly Gutstein, building on Charles Fillmore's (1979) criteria for fluent speakers, has proposed a more rigorous definition. She suggests that second language learners should satisfy the following four criteria to be considered "fluent" writers:

1) write easily and quickly with few pauses;

2) get meaning across in coherent, reasoned sentences (errors in form may occur as long as they don't interfere substantially with meaning);

3) be able to use writing to express a wide range of language functions;

4) be creative and imaginative in writing (e.g. use humor or metaphor (Gutstein 1987);

Based on my own teaching and research, as well as on the findings of other researchers (Kreeft et al 1984), dialogue writing seems a likely way to help students improve in all four areas.

It is the dialogue itself that makes this possible. As students read and respond to their teacher's comments in a non-threatening, enjoyable context, they are pulled slowly but surely into ever deeper use of the written language. Almost insidiously, without realizing it, they can begin to

make progress in each of these four skills. Let's look at how this might happen in more detail.

Maria, whom I mentioned earlier, speaks for many adult students when she says that dialogue writing has helped her with the first skill--writing more easily:

> In the beginning I was more worried about my grammar. Now not any more, now I'm worried about the theme. It's easier for me to write in English now than before. Maybe at the beginning I had to think a lot about what I wanted to talk about, but now I just start writing. I don't think about it. I think of the ideas, whatever came to my brain.

I have found that many students begin by writing two or three sentences per entry. By mid-semester, they are writing a half or full page within the same amount of time. This observation, confirmed by numerous researchers (Peyton, Staton, Richardson and Wolfram 1988; Kreeft 1984; Shuy 1980) is another indication that the process helps students to write more easily and quickly.

Second, conversing on paper certainly encourages students to get meaning across coherently. Misunderstandings on the part of either participant usually become evident during the course of the exchange, and can be resolved in subsequent discussion. Such negotiation of meaning is intrinsic to the nature of human dialogue, particularly if that dialogue is extended over a long period of time.

Third, as I showed in Chapter One (page 13), written dialogue lends itself naturally to the use of a wide variety

of language functions, from reporting personal facts and opinions to asking questions, complaining, giving excuses, and expressing other communicative needs and desires. Again, this happens in the normal course of conversation, as both people get to know each other and increasingly share information and ideas meaningful to them.

Finally, dialogue journals can be "a place to enjoy writing and play with language," in the words of one teacher. Students can be droll, witty, somber, cute and even poetic in their writing. Metaphor often appears in their dialogue; the Polish student I discussed earlier, who described her life as a "highway with exits but no on-ramps," is but one example. Learning to use language creatively is probably the most difficult of the four criteria to acquire, however. Whether or not a student actually succeeds probably depends a lot on the personalities and styles of both student and teacher.

Just as someone learns to stay upright on a bicycle (and to ride more easily and quickly) by practicing, a language student doing dialogue journals becomes more "fluent" in writing by actively communicating on paper. When it comes to improving fluency, dialogue writing can be learning by doing, in the best sense of the phrase.

Building a bridge to academic writing. Recent research by Joy Kreeft Peyton and others suggests that dialogue journal writing involves numerous skills also required of

more formal academic writing. In one case study, Kreeft (1984) showed how dialogue journal writing helped a young student learn to elaborate on topics, to write with awareness of his audience's interests and knowledge, and to write about topics new to his audience--all skills important in more formal essay writing. In a separate study comparing students' dialogue writing to their assigned compositions, Peyton and others (1988) found that the journal writing was as linguistically complex, had as much extended topic elaboration, and was as high in text cohesion as their formal writing.

Dialogue journal writing should not replace practice in writing formal prose, as I'll discuss in more detail in Chapter Three (page 67). However, the journals can provide extensive practice in skills needed for other kinds of writing, in a context that is more enjoyable, less threatening, and more personally meaningful than is often true of assigned compositions. As such, they can serve as a nice bridge to other writing skills.

Promoting the Learning or Acquisition of the Forms and Syntax of the Written Language

Language is like muscle. It grows with use. Dialogue writing immerses students in the use of written language, giving them both reason and means to learn new structures in that language.

I believe that interactive writing can promote the learning of written forms and syntax in at least two ways. First, the desire to communicate, to maintain the dialogue, gives students reason to consult and even study correct forms of the new language. Second, the very act of communicating in writing may promote the subconscious acquisition of written linguistic structures, according to Staton and other researchers (Kreeft et al 1984). Let's now examine each possibility more closely.

Engaged in real dialogue, students have thoughts bursting to get out, even though they may not have mastered the means to do so. The desire to express themselves may lead them to look up or ask the spelling or meaning of a word, or the correct form of some grammar point. I've often seen word translations in Chinese and Spanish scribbled in the margins of my responses; some of these words appear again and again in English in the students' subsequent writing. Some examples from journals I have kept with my students are included in Figure 1, on the following page.

I remember vividly José, an affable, Salvadorean student who often seemed more interested in the other students than in the classwork. One day he approached me, almost apologetically, while the class was busy writing in their journals. "Excuse me," he asked in Spanish. "How do I say 'I am' for yesterday?" We hadn't yet covered past tense verb forms in class. I wrote what he wanted on the

Figure 1.

Examples of student translations of new vocabulary in their teacher's journal entries.

Some people don't have any place to live. In the United States, there are many good things, but also many bad things.

What do yw think about life in the United States?

think: pensar reflexionar
but - pero-sino-mas
also - tambien
bad - malo
make - hacer

Sincerely,

Paul

...Holidays are very important times in our lives. Life would be much worse without them.

Sinceiely,

Paul

board. We discussed the concept of past tense, and compared it to Spanish. He thanked me and returned to his seat. That evening "wasn't" appeared in his latest entry.

José certainly did not master the use of the past tense of "to be" during that brief exchange. This wasn't even his first introduction to the concept of past tense. I felt, nonetheless, that this was a significant step in his learning. He had thoughts he wanted to express, and he knew that he didn't know how to do so correctly, so he asked.

Writing in journals as a beginning French student, I often went back over my teachers' entries, seeking phrases or words that captured what I wanted to say. At other times I consulted a dictionary or verb chart, spending anywhere from five to thirty minutes studying a particular structure. There were periods, certainly, when I felt less patient or energetic and would write an entire entry without consulting anything. At some point, though, my desire to know how to say things correctly led me back to my "sources"--my teachers' entries, my books, and my French-speaking friends.

Now let's consider the second possibility, namely that the written structures of a second language might be "acquired" subconsciously in the course of written dialogue. This concept was first proposed by Jana Staton (Kreeft et al 1984, 160), who argued for a process of written second language acquisition analgous to that envisioned by Krashen (1982) for oral language. In this view, a second language

learner could assimilate written structures by actively communicating in writing with native speakers, providing that several criteria are met: the communication must be meaningful and interesting; "real" language must be used--e.g., the native speaker's language shouldn't be grammatically sequenced according to a pre-established plan; the written "input" received by the learner must be comprehensible but slightly more advanced structurally than his or her own writing; the interaction must be non-threatening and comfortable for the student, and there must be opportunities for clarification and elaboration.

Staton goes on to suggest that dialogue journals meet these criteria (Kreeft et al 1984, 160). She shows how one teacher varies systematically the syntactic complexity and interactional features (e.g. consistent use of topic sentences to introduce new topics) of her writing according to her students' English proficiency, and compares these systematic variations to those identified by Long (1983) in native speaker/non-native speaker (NS-NNS) speech. Staton concludes that a teacher's dialogue writing, like the "optimal input" of native-speaker (NS) speech, may promote acquisition of the structures of written English.

Although the hypothesis is appealing, many mysteries remain. We still know relatively little about <u>how</u> "optimal input" might lead language to lodge in the "subconscious,"

to become sufficiently owned by the brain that it can be produced automatically, without conscious effort. Hopefully, as linguists and educators learn more about the ways in which adults acquire a second language, we will eventually understand more fully how dialogue journal writing can contribute to the subconscious, or automatic, acquisition of written linguistic structures.

Discussing and Solving Problems

I mentioned earlier that written dialogues tend to evolve in stages. As students become more comfortable "conversing" with the teacher, their entries evolve from relatively dry descriptions of where they live, what they like, or what they did to more involved discussions of important events, feelings, and problems. I have found that this transition usually takes four to eight weeks, writing with adult students between one and three times a week.[1]

Some of the problems that come up are discrete and resolvable; others are more complex, ongoing and even intractable. Depending on the teacher's willingness and ability to respond, students can benefit in a number of ways from these discussions. They may get the comfort and satisfaction that comes of sharing problems with another

---

[1] Leslee Reed, who has written journals with children every day for seventeen years, has found that it usually takes four to six weeks with her students, writing with them five days a week (Staton et al 1988, 205).

person, knowing that he or she is really listening. Sometimes, the teacher may be able to offer a new perspective, ask questions, or give information that actually helps the students solve a problem.

Simply sharing problems with a sympathetic audience can be helpful. Alicia, a widow in her thirties, discussed many aspects of her life with her teacher, Kathleen. Sometimes these were relatively discrete problems, as in the following exchange:

Mar. 15	**Dear Kathleen, this Weekend I don't Feel very good. because I have a coold. What about you,?**
Mar. 15	Dear Alicia, Did you stay in bed over the weekend. Did you have a fever?
Mar. 17	**Kathleen, I'm did a Little bit Feber I have bronchitis, but no is problem for my, Bicause not have a Job here.**
Mar. 20	Alicia, I'm so sorry you're not feeling well. Many people have bronchitis now.

Other problems were more difficult. Whatever the trouble, though, Kathleen listened and responded as an empathetic friend. Figure 2, on the next page, presents a series of exhanges that occured about ten weeks into the semester about Alicia's dog, Skipper. This dog was an important figure in Alicia's life, and the discussion, though it might appear trivial, was significant to her.

Sometimes the problems involve school. A student who is always very late to a morning class may explain that he

Figure 2
Problem Sharing between Alicia
and her Teacher, Kathleen

Apr. 5	**Kathleen: I talked with my Mother She's good, My dog is no good bicause no eat.**
Apr. 6	Alicia, I'm happy to know that your mother is OK. It's too bad about your dog. Do you know why he doesn't want to eat?
Apr. 7	**Kathlen I'm not happy because I talked with my Mother and she told me Duchess's broken two legs. But my mother got to Duchess a doctor and cast the two legs.**
	I'm so sorry about your dog. I'm sure he is going to get better soon. We don't have a dog. We had a bird, a canary, but a cat came and got him. My son was very sad. We are going to get a new bird. Did you have any other pets besides Duchess? a cat? How old is Duchess?
no date	**I'm not have cat because I don't like the cat...On Sunday I went to the Zoo is pretty nice I like. Yesterday I'm not come to school because I'm tired**
Apr. 12	I don't like cats either. I like the big cats at the zoo - lions, tigers and leopards. Sorry you were tired on Monday. Monday is usually a tired day.
Apr. 21	**I'm happy because the nex weekend I go to Laketahoe With My Nevs Frien. but I'm Worry because may mother not writing a letter For My**
Apr. 23	Lake Tahoe's so beautiful. I love to go up there. I'm sure your mother is busy, and you will get a letter very soon.
no date	**I don't worry because my mother call My And She tell my abut Duchess and She are good**
Apr 25	I'm so glad you got a call from your mother. with good news. Thank you Alicia for the wonderful candy for Teacher's day. You are so nice to think of me.

is exhausted because he works a double night shift. Another student may wonder "aloud" whether or not to change to a more advanced class. The teacher can discuss these problems honestly with the student, perhaps offering alternatives for consideration, or simply letting the student know that she understands and accepts the situation.

Most recent immigrants and refugees enrolled in ESL programs in this country are poor. Many face serious problems involving housing, immigration, employment, family and emotional difficulties, neighborhood violence, or health. Adult students often reveal these problems in their journals. Some of these can and should be actively addressed, yet the student may feel unable to do so alone. This can raise difficult issues for the teacher, who may feel that merely "listening" while knowing of a serious, remediable situation is uncomfortable at best, and at worst unethical.

On the other hand, teachers must be cautious about personal involvement. Within refugee ESL circles, I have known teachers to complain that their efforts to help students became burdensome, involving them after hours in such activities as doing income taxes, calling (and sometimes "fighting" with) landlords, going to hospital emergency rooms, and even getting involved in family disputes. Sometimes such involvement can become exhausting, provoking cries of "burnout"; occasionally, as in some

disputes, the involvement may actually become threatening to the teacher. In either case, the desire to help can at times lead teachers over the fine line between healthy concern and inappropriate involvement.

Making Referrals. Frequently, the dilemma posed by not wanting to do either too little or too much can be resolved by offering to be a referral source. The teacher can mention that he or she knows of a person or organization that might be able to help with a particular problem, giving the student the option of asking for the information.

Miguel, an adult student of mine in California, had been complaining for weeks that he wanted to quit his job, when he wrote this entry:

> Yes. I want stay here in this country. But I have to know Inglish first, and about friends I have many friends and then that I have other problem. I don't have paper grin car. I don't have nathink. And the imigrashion maybe no more job for me.

I suspected that Miguel could get himself in much deeper trouble by quitting his job, and felt that he might benefit from legal advice, so in my response I offered to refer him to an organization specializing in immigration work:

> You are doing a good job learning English. If you study hard you will learn a lot of English quickly.....Maybe you should talk to an immigration lawyer. Do you know about the ____ (community agency specializing in immigration assistance)? If you are interested, please talk to me after class.

Miguel in fact did not know his rights under the new amnesty law. After class he asked for the name of the agency in

question. They told him that he wasn't eligible for amnesty, but that a "grandfather" clause would effectively protect him as long as he stayed in the same job. He followed their advice, kept his job, and remained in the country.

A year earlier, also through our dialogue journal, I had referred another student who was in the country illegally to a similar agency. This woman, it turned out, was eligible for amnesty. After years of living in fear, unable to get out of a deadend job or ever to visit her family overseas, she at last became a legal resident and began to make important changes in her life.

The referral role requires that a teacher be informed of appropriate sources of assistance for specific issues, or at least know where to find that information. It expands the teacher's role somewhat to that of community liaison, yet protects him or her from either inappropriate involvement or unethical detachment. In the process, it enables the student to "use" the dialogue journal to help address specific problems.

Several students have told me that writing in their journals is "like a therapy." One French student explained:

> I learned a <u>lot</u> about...myself. Things came out of my subconscious in the writing almost like a therapy session (not necessarily personal revelations).

In many respects dialogue journals function in something akin to the "understanding/listening" role of teachers in

Community Language Learning (CLL), based on the work of Charles Curran (1976). That approach trains teachers in a special kind of listening, designed to put students at ease to discuss whatever is on their minds. In both CLL and dialogue writing, students are supported by knowing that their teacher is listening sincerely and sympathetically. Nonetheless, in dialogue writing it is crucial that neither the teacher nor the student perceive the teacher's role as that of therapist. Once that line is crossed, the teacher may be expected to meet needs that are both unrealistic and inappropriate.

Some teachers find that dealing with students' painful personal matters is the most difficult aspect of journal writing. Clearly, each teacher must decide for him or herself how involved to get. Teachers should not feel compelled to discuss students' personal lives if they don't want to. As in oral conversation, if a topic feels uncomfortably personal, the teacher should be able to find gentle, effective ways to steer the discussion in other directions.

Joy Peyton and Leslee Reed (1988) have written that students may occasionally reveal information indicating such serious or immediate danger to themselves or someone else that the teacher feels compelled to seek outside help, with or without consulting the student. Such action would obviously violate the confidentiality of the dialogue, and

should therefore only be undertaken under extreme circumstances.

SOME BENEFITS FOR TEACHERS

So far, I've examined the benefits of dialogue journals for students. What about the benefits for teachers?

Teachers stand to gain in many ways. As I'll show in the following pages, the writing can be a powerful tool for individualizing instruction, planning lessons, and solving problems in the classroom. But perhaps most importantly, dialogue writing teaches the teacher--about students as people, about their cultures, and thus about the world (Staton, Peyton and Gutstein 1986). It can even teach teachers about themselves. And for some teachers, the writing has remarkable power to strengthen one's sense of purpose in teaching, and to give or restore love and meaning to the work.

Individualizing Instruction

> Strange: All this difference should be
> 'Twixt Tweedledum and Tweedledee.
>
> --Byron

Every student is unique. No matter how much care is taken to place language students of similar proficiency together, the differences between individuals in the same class can be enormous. Being aware of and responding to those differences are two of the greatest challenges of

classroom language teaching. And dialogue journals offer teachers a powerful means of meeting those challenges.

During class, especially those with more than twenty-five students, most teachers are hard pressed to monitor closely each student's abilities or progress. Dialogue journals can change that radically. They open a window on each student, allowing the teacher to follow each individual's written language production and comprehension as manifest in the dialogue. Whether the issue at hand is mastery of particular linguistic structures or the grasp of certain ideas in a content-based language class, the writing provides teachers with extensive, ongoing information about where each student stands, and about their strengths and weaknesses as students.

Consider the cases of Sakun and Miguel, two of my beginning ESL students in the same class. Sakun, a Cambodian woman in her thirties, was shy in class. She'd come to school with only two years of previous education. Miguel was more outgoing. Not yet twenty, he'd completed high school before coming to the U.S. Just by watching them, I got a glimpse of those differences. In class, however, both completed the same activities successfully. And with almost thirty other students to work with, I simply couldn't keep detailed track of how each was doing or what they needed to work on.

After we began doing dialogue journals, that changed dramatically. Consider the following initial exchanges from their journals, written during class on the same two days:

Sakun

Jan 26 **Dear Paul, My name is Sakun. I am a student. I am happy. I'm from CAMBoDIA.**

Dear Sakun, Thank you for your beautiful letter! I am from Rhode Island. I know many Cambodian people who live in Providence, Rhode Island. Someday maybe I can visit Cambodia. Sakun, please tell me more about yourself. Are you married? Where do you live?

Jan 27 **My name is Sakun. I am married. I'm from CAMBODIA. I have 3 children. I**

Miguel

Jan 26 **Dear Paul, I live in San Francisco. I have one year in this city. I,m Single, I' like A WOMES, AND I AM 20 years old, I'm like this school too. Maybe I'm will going to Mexico City, But no right Now. Maybe two years more, Sincerely, Miguel.**

Dear Miguel, Thanks for your letter! I'm happy that you like this school. Are you from Mexico City? I have been to Mexico City two times. The last time I went was April, 1987. I loved Mexico City. It is very big. Please tell me more about yourself.

Jan 27 **Hi! Paul! How are you Today? I'm Think God I'm Happy too, Becose you like Mexico. Well now I want to tell you somethink aboutmy life, my father an mother, sisters, and all the family is in Mexico. I livin in this country for myself., I have a probns about my work, becose they need that I speak inglish, These why I coming in this school. I need speak more inglish, if I want go up, I'm think that everybody need inglish, but I need right now, becose in two years I'm working in the same company and then. They say you nee speak more inglish if you want to make more money. I'm tell you More about Myself. Sign Miguel. Thanks.**

These brief entries give some sense of the wealth of information the journals can provide. In just a few paragraphs, Miguel demonstrates much greater fluency, a larger vocabulary, and an ability to answer open-ended questions and to elaborate on a topic. In contrast, Sakun struggles to write two lines, answers some but not all of my directive questions, and repeats herself rather than expand on what she has already said. Miguel's writing also reveals specific errors in spelling, use of prepositions and verb tenses. These brief entries give but a hint, moreover, of the kind of information I could obtain from the journals; over time, I found the writing invaluable in making me aware of how each was doing with the language, from day to day.

Clearly, dialogue journals can be an important assessment tool. But they don't stop there. Roger Shuy (1982) makes this point, writing about his experience in a graduate seminar on sociolinguistics:

> What was shocking to me...was that the students made clear to me in their journals exactly where they were in their development. This enabled me to individualize my instruction, in their journals, but also in the class itself, in ways I had never done before. Every teacher has general assumptions about the progress of the class as a whole based on cluses given by a few. I discovered something that I suppose I should have known; not all students were at the place I thought they were. Some only caught on to the central concepts at the very end. This knowledge, revealed privately in their journals but not made openly in the class, guided me in teaching all 12 of them in different aspects of the course that they needed. I believe I did as much teaching in the journals as I did in the seminar meetings.

As Shuy's comments suggest, dialogue journals allow teachers to individualize their students' work in two ways. First, teachers can use the information gleaned through journals to tailor individual assignments to particular student needs, either during class or as homework. Perhaps most importantly, the writing itself can become an important form of individualized instruction.

Teachers can adjust their dialogue journal entries in a variety of ways to their students' individual needs. In interviews with ESL teachers who use dialogue journals, for instance, I've found that many make a point of adjusting the complexity of their writing to what they perceive is each student's linguistic proficiency. To illustrate, a teacher could ask any one of the following questions about essentially the same topic, depending on the student's proficiency:

-Are you married?
-Are you married? What is your wife's name?
-Please tell me about your wife.
-Please tell me about your home life.

Another individualization strategy is to consciously weave specific structures used erroneously by students into individual responses. I do this myself, and have spoken with a number of other teachers who do so consistently. Responding to student errors is a tricky issue in dialogue journal writing, however, which I'll examine more closely in Chapter Three.

In their major study of dialogue journal writing with sixth grade ESL students, Joy Kreeft, Jana Staton and Roger Shuy analyzed in detail how one teacher varied diverse aspects of her writing according to differences in her students' language abilities. As I discussed earlier (page 38), Staton showed how this teacher varied more or less systematically the linguistic complexity and interactive features of her entries according to the students' language proficiency (Kreeft et al 1984, Ch. 5). Joy Kreeft found that the teacher adjusted her questions to each student's language level, and further that the complexity of those questions tended to change as the students became more fluent (Kreeft et al 1984, Ch. 7). And Roger Shuy documented a complex but very systematic variation in the teacher's use of language functions according to student use of those same functions (Kreeft et al 1984, Ch. 6).

In that same study, Staton and Shuy argued that many of the teacher's adjustments to individual differences in student language abilities may have been subconscious. Along those lines, Roger Shuy postulated what he called an "implicit theory of language learning" that subconsciously governs a teacher's use of language functions according to his or her students' proficiency (Kreeft et al 1984, Ch. 6). Because these studies were based on one teacher's writing, however, we must be cautious about generalizing the results. As more research is done with a larger sample of teacher

journals, we will hopefully learn more about just how the individualization of dialogue writing occurs.

Finally, the journals give teachers some welcome flexibility in responding to individual student preferences. I learned how important this can be from Mei Lu, a young Chinese student in my beginning ESL class.

Mei Lu was probably the shyest, most timid student I have ever met. She wrote very brief entries in her journal, and they were done so lightly in pencil that I often struggled to decipher them. Yet at the same time, she seemed always to do what was asked of her, including her journal. One day when I took the journals home I noticed with surprise that hers was missing. The next day it reappeared with this entry:

> I'm sorry I not shoud take the letter at home write, becaaese English letter is difficult and have short time but I hope very sorry

I responded:

> You don't need to be sorry. I am happy you took the letter home. I understand you need more time to write. Your letter is very nice. Please take this journal home to write again if you want to.

Thereafter Mei Lu often took her journal home, and her writing blossomed; she seemed to write more comfortably and in greater detail about whatever seemed to be on her mind at the time.

ESL instructor Nina Turitz (1982) has described a similar situation with a Taiwanese student who did better when allowed to write at home. As she pointed out, "A nice

advantage to the journal is that a request such as this can be easily fulfilled."

Planning Lessons and Courses

Student entries can give a teacher remarkably consistent and timely feedback on the effectiveness of a particular lesson. The feedback may be indirect, insofar as the students' writing reveals what concepts or linguistic forms they have mastered or are struggling with, or it may be direct, in the form of complaints, questions, or criticisms about a lesson. Either way, this information can be a valuable aid to planning future lessons.

Leslee Reed eloquently sums up her relevant experience with sixth graders:

> I find that journal writing is sort of the kernel of my teaching. When I sit down to do journals, I am doing a kind of resume of my day and of each child. As I'm writing each child, I'm mentally thinking about that child. I conjure up in my mind that child on that day....Then as I'm reading his journal I'm seeing if what I sensed as a teacher came through to him as a student. And often it becomes clear then in my lesson plans OK, this did not go over well. I'll need to get this over from a different point of view. So it becomes a planning tool, a core from which I'm planning not only tomorrow's work but, frequently, next week's work. For me, it makes my whole school year flow, because I have a constant finger on the pulse of each student. (Staton et al 1988, 71)

Although adult ESL students generally write in their journals less often than children and seem to be less likely to give direct feedback on lessons, many of the adult teachers I have surveyed confirm their usefulness in

planning. A number of teachers have told me that they customarily plan grammar lessons or units around mistakes that recur in a majority of their students' journals. Finding that half of a class consistently forgets question marks and other punctuation, for instance, might prompt a teacher to devote a lesson to those issues. Similarly, in advanced language classes and courses focused on content, such as a class in American or French culture, student interests and questions as revealed in the journals can become the basis for planning particular lessons or activities.

Teaching the Teacher

> If ever I am to be a teacher, it will be to learn more than to teach.
>
> --Madam Dorothée Deluzy

The greatest rewards of ESL teaching, I've found, come through learning about my students, and through them, about the world. Dialogue journals expand the possibilities for that kind of learning enormously. For me as teacher, they are almost an education in themselves.

Several years ago, one of my ESL classes put together a book of their own compositions. They had been keeping dialogue journals all year, and like their journal writing, the compositions they assembled told of whatever they wanted to write--of families, of love that was strong and of love

gone sour, of homes long ago left behind, of losing jobs and of finding new ones, of learning to ski, and of hating to drive. They called it "Pieces of Life."

That's what I think of when I think about my students' journal writing--pieces of life. Reading their entries, I learn far more about them as people, about their cultures, and about the world than would ever be possible without the journals. And that is one of their greatest gifts to me as a teacher--they teach me things I would never learn otherwise.

Almost any topic is fair game in most dialogue journal writing. Teachers might learn about different attitudes and experiences regarding education, religion, family roles, work, play, food, holidays, health, sickness, and even death. In short, human culture in all its diversity can reveal itself in the students' prose. Other teachers I've interviewed have spoken enthusiastically about this benefit of dialogue writing. Leslee Reed captures this feeling when she writes:

> If you ask me wht I am getting out of journal writing, particularly in a multi-cultural setting, I'd say it's that I'm learning, I'm learning, I'm learning! Especially with so many cultures, there's such richness. I'm learning every day about little nuances of social behavior and customs and culture. I don't think I've ever grown so much in my life as I have this year in understanding the problems of different cultures, different races, trying to fit into this pattern of American life. I think I have learned to respect other cultures much more. (Staton 88, 70)

Sharing cultural tidbits with students can be interesting and fun. The results are not always what one might expect, however. One day, Mei Lu (whom I mentioned earlier) described in detail her family's celebration of Chinese New Year. That night I asked a friend how to write "Happy New Year" in Chinese, which she did for me on a blank scrap of paper. I took it home and diligently copied the characters onto my next entry to Mei Lu.

The next day during our journal writing time I noticed that Mei Lu and her neighbor weren't writing. They seemed to be playing with Mei Lu's journal, turning it around and around. I asked what was going on. Mei Lu turned red and looked down, silently. Her neighbor, an older woman, took me aside and whispered, "You wrote 'Happy New Year' upside down!" As we were all laughing, I thought: Teachers can be slow learners, too!

Growing through Writing

Dialogue writing helps me to grow both interpersonally and as a writer. In my relationships with others it keeps me alert, for instance, to the countless subtle differences between individuals, differences that I can't appreciate fully during class. It also teaches me about myself, specifically about how I respond to those differences. Being able to read back over previous entries is invaluable in that process. Sometimes, in retrospect, I think that

with a given student I've been too abstract, or too personal, or too political. The journals allow me to change my approach in mid-stream, if need be. They are like a mirror that allows me to look not only at the present, but also at the past.

The practice has also helped me to grow as a writer. Responding to twenty or thirty students day after day streches my expressive wings, so to speak, in several ways. First, it encourages me to become more versatile with words, and to look for many different sides of the same subject. For example, I often find that a number of students bring up essentially the same topic on any given day--such as, say, families. I may want to respond about that same subject--by discussing my grandfather, for instance--with each student, but without repeating myself exactly in each journal. As a result, I learn to aproach a given subject from several different angles.

Second, tailoring my remarks to what I perceive as the subtle differences between different students' interests and language abilities helps to hone my skill at writing to different audiences. As I discussed earlier, this skill is important in many, if not all, written genres, including most formal academic and professional writing, business correspondence, marketing and public relations prose, and even many forms of fiction (e.g. childrens' vs. adult

fiction, or other fiction written with a particular audience in mind).

Finally, keeping dialogue journals has made personal letter writing easier for me. Before I started doing journals, I rarely corresponded with friends. I've found that since I began the practice, writing letters no longer seems so onerous. I enjoy it more, and write with much greater frequency. While I can't attribute the change entirely to dialogue writing, I now receive many more letters, as well!

Inspiring the Teacher

This brings me, last but proverbially and certainly not least, to one of the more intangible but vital benefits to teachers of dialogue writing. I've found that like few other techniques, the writing can help motivate and inspire me to teach. And I've learned that many others share this perception.

More than one teacher has told me that doing journals is sometimes the best part of his or her teaching. This enthusiasm can manifest itself in many ways, some of them a bit surprising. I read one day, for instance, of a teacher in Washington D.C. who was so taken by her student's journals that she couldn't wait to get home to read them, so she would flip through them while driving home on the

Beltway. I chuckled when I read this because I, too, have done the same thing more than once.

Beyond being compelling, the interaction can be deeply rewarding. For me, the connection to the students as people is so powerful, the feeling so gratifying, that it can give whole new meaning to my daily work in teaching. It renews a sense of value in my classroom work, and strengthens my knowledge that I am there both to grow myself, and to participate in the growth of others.

The day in class can seem difficult and lesson planning endless, but when I sit down to do the journals, little else matters. It is sometimes the best part of my teaching. And I know from talking with other teachers that I am not alone in this feeling.

CHAPTER THREE:

WHERE DO DIALOGUE JOURNALS FIT IN?

SOME CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Dialogue journals can serve as a supplement to other teaching strategies, or as the central element in a teacher's approach. In either case, like any other technique, they also have limitations and pitfalls.

In this chapter I'll discuss five issues that seem, both from my own work and from the literature, to emerge pretty consistently in dialogue writing with adult language students. First, time constraints are an obvious nettle; writing regularly to every student is never done quickly. Second, the lack of corrections is a frustrating limitation for many adult students, who see it as an impediment to improving their accuracy in the second language. Third, although they can help students improve certain writing skills (see Chapter Two), dialogue journals omit entirely practice in other crucial aspects of learning to write. The fourth issue concerns trust, without which the practice may fall flat, and can even become a liability. Finally, like any technique, dialogue journals simply don't work for all students, and with some it takes a long time for things to click. In general, we're told, patience is a virtue, but in dialogue journal writing, it's often a must.

I present these issues not as drawbacks, but as challenges to be aware of and addressed creatively. In that spirit, I'll also discuss some possible strategies for dealing with these challenges.

TIME CONSTRAINTS

In my 1988 survey of adult ESL, French and Spanish teachers, I found that most who had used dialogue journals devoted between two and a half and five hours per week to them. (Some spent as many as eight and ten hours!) Almost half cited the time required as a problem, and at least one respondent had abandoned the practice because of time.

The exact time required depends, of course, on the number of students, frequency of writing, and length of responses. Teachers must occasionally make compromises. Some adult instructors see well over a hundred students a week. With that kind of load, a teacher may decide to write only to certain classes (Michael 1982). Some teachers I've interviewed write only once or twice a week with each student and stagger their responses, having certain students hand in their journals on Monday, others on Tuesday, and so on. Researchers have reported a similar approach with high school and college students as well (Michael 1982).

Perhaps not surprisingly, some teachers try to solve this problem by not responding to every entry. One teacher I interviewed has the students write every day; she collects

and responds in the journals once a week. Another does the same, but asks the students to leave blank spaces between each entry so that she can go back and answer each thought. Both teachers feel that they achieve meaningful, productive exchanges in this way. Their experiences may be exceptional, however. In my surveys of students, for instance, those whose teachers responded only periodically to their journal entries consistently complained that the exercise was forced and unsatisfying. Along these lines, I believe that in most dialogue writing, responding only occasionally runs the risk of distorting the dialogue and significantly limiting its value.

Jocelyn Steer (1988) has reported an innovative and timesaving approach to writing in content-based or advanced classes. Students are asked to write about subjects related to course content. They keep their journals in looseleaf notebooks and write once or twice a week. Each time she collects the journals, the teacher writes a single long response addressing themes common to all the students' entries. This is mimeographed and given to each student, along with brief individual responses. The arrangement reportedly works well and considerably limits the time required of the teacher.

No doubt more than a few teachers have stopped doing journals because of the time involved. Many others have likely had to find creative middle paths between writing

frequently to every student and not writing at all. In the long run, however, I believe that most teachers who value the practice simply make it a priority. The results seem worth the price. As Leslee Reed put it:

> Some people ask whether or not writing in 26 journals each night isn't very tiring. I suppose, like everyone else, teaching exhausts me, but when I sit down to do my journals, I get rejuvenated. I get greatly amused at some of the comments the children make. Sometimes their advice to me is hilarious. Their feedback is so good for me and I really do look forward to it. I can be just dog tired and think, Well, I've got to get to my journals, and the first thing I know, I'm so involved that I'm no longer weary. It's a good way for me to go. (Staton et al 1988, 71)

Ms. Reed would probably have agreed with Goethe, who said:

> We always have time enough, if we will but use it aright.

ACCURACY AND ERROR CORRECTION

Dialogue journals, by themselves, are not a terribly efficient way to improve accuracy in a second language. First, by design, they offer no systematic presentation or explanation of linguistic structures. More significantly, teachers generally do not make overt corrections on student entries. Many teachers try to include correct versions of student language in their responses, and may subconsciously adjust their language to that used by the student, yet the burden remains on the student to either consciously or unconsciously incorporate those models into their own writing.

Researchers have not presented the lack of overt corrections as a major problem when writing with younger students. Based on my own classroom experience and on interviews with both students and teachers, however, it is a source of tremendous frustration for many adult students (and for some of their teachers!). I believe that this is partly because adults have very different perceptions of their own needs than do children, and partly because adults may actually learn in different ways that rely more heavily on overt correction.

In my beginning ESL class in San Francisco, eighteen out of nineteen adult students interviewed said that they would rather have errors corrected in their journals. In a separate longitudinal survey of eight advanced ESL students, I found that roughly half would have preferred to receive corrections. One student articulately expressed her reasons as follows:

> I want to be corrected. I don't think I'll learn anything like this. Of course I make mistakes, and if I don't get corrected I'll make mistakes again and again.
>
> I don't write anything I think is wrong. When I write I think it's right, but maybe it's not. That's why I want it to be corrected.

Keeping journals as a student myself, I felt that I would have learned a great deal more French had I been able to get at least periodic help with my errors. On one occasion a friend who teaches French went through one page with me, helping me to identify and explain each error. In the space

of twenty-five minutes I learned some grammar rules that I have applied pretty consistently ever since.

Most of the teachers I have interviewed who are reluctant to correct journals believe that doing so would destroy the delicately constructed "equality" of the interaction and somehow damage, or even ruin, the dialogue. Perhaps they are right. Yet it seems clear that this is a major frustration for many adults, and as such, should be addressed.

The issue has to do both with student options for correction and with their expectations of journal writing. I believe that most adult language students are highly conscious of and concerned with accuracy. If students are given extensive other writing that includes systematic error correction, the problem might be solved. But lacking that alternative, especially if the student and teacher have very different expectations for the journals, the problem is likely to persist.

Teachers need to be eminently clear about the journals' purpose from the beginning. Then, if students are concerned with improving their mastery of structures (and which students aren't?), the teacher can include regular practice with other writing (such as process writing--see next section) that is meaningful and includes systematic work with errors.

Nonetheless, some teachers feel compelled to provide direct feedback on errors in the journals. One option, designed to preserve the integrity of the dialogue, is to hold periodic individual conferences during which teacher and student review a photocopied page from the student's journal. On that page, they can identify errors and discuss relevant rules and corrections in detail.

Another option is what some teachers call the "grammatical P.S." I first learned about it from Katya, a young Hungarian studying to be an English teacher in her country. She had studied very little English in grade school, much less than almost all of her eventual classmates at the teacher's college. The only reason she'd been accepted, she said, was that she'd had a teacher in the ninth grade with whom she corresponded regularly, through the mail, in English. The letters were "real," without artificially sequenced language and without corrections, but usually at the bottom the teacher would add a gentle P.S. on one or two specific points: "By the way, In English we usually say..." Katya believes that she learned much of her English in this way.

I have since learned of other teachers who incorporate this approach into their dialogue journals or into regular "letters" with students. ESL teacher Linda Axelrod (1985), for instance, has described in detail an approach to student-teacher letter writing that includes one to three

carefully chosen grammatical points at the bottom of each letter. However it's done, the "grammatical P.S." can be a nice compromise that meets adults' need for correction while preserving the integrity of true dialogue.

THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE JOURNALS IN THE TEACHING OF "WRITING".

Although dialogue writing is a powerful means of building written fluency and developing certain useful writing skills (See Chapter Two), it omits several key dimensions of learning to write. First, the journals do not give students practice or guidance in the crucial art of revising, either for content, style, or accuracy. And because message is so strongly emphasized over form, there is no practice in writing within formal conventions such as business letters, reflective essays, or persuasive papers. Nor do students get external reinforcement for correct grammar, so that there are times when their journal writing is less linguistically "correct" than they are capable of. Diagnostically, therefore, journals may not portray a student's writing abilities accurately or completely. As Peyton and others (1988) have pointed out, "It is only by looking at performance on a variety of writing tasks that we can begin to understand the writing ability of an individual student."

I have known some teachers to rely on dialogue journals as their adult language learners' only regular form of

writing. Either consciously or in ad hoc fashion, the journals become these teachers' "approach" to teaching the written language. Unfortunately, such an approach is likely to leave the students without practice in crucial skills.

The best answer here, in my view, is to make dialogue journals part of a comprehensive program that covers all aspects of the writing process--brainstorming, drafting, composing, revising, editing and even publishing--as well as a variety of writing genres and styles (Coffey 1987). A number of activities embraced under the loose rubric of "process writing" can meet most or all of these needs. It would require an entire book to discuss these approaches in any detail. I recommend works by Ann Raimes (1986) and Nancy Pfingstag (1984), among others, for practical treatments of the subject. The point here is that dialogue writing must be combined with other activities for a truly comprehensive approach to teaching writing.

The same goes for reading. Eventually, students need to read depersonalized material if they are going to be able to function on their own in this highly literate and computerized society. Rather than stand alone, dialogue reading should be one part of an overall reading program, thereby addressing students broad needs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

As I mentioned earlier (page 45), student discussions of personal or outside problems can sometimes put a teacher in an uncomfortable or even dangerous position. I will not re-examine that particular issue here, but I will take a look at the related question of trust. There are situations in which trust or freedom of expression is limited or doesn't exist. In those contexts, dialogue writing may accomplish little, and it can even become a liability. The case of Claire illustrates this dilemma.

Claire is an experienced, successful language teacher. Recently she taught a short-term ESL class to a group of Latin Americans who had come to the U.S. under joint government sponsorship. Looking forward to the rapport and mutual growth she knew could come through dialogue writing, she asked them to start writing in journals.

She didn't really think twice, at least initially, when some students didn't get the notebooks back to her as often as she'd hoped. Gradually, though, they were returned later and later. Finally, a large group of students refused to hand them in at all. At a lengthy, somewhat difficult general discussion Claire discovered the unexpected truth.

The students had come from and were returning to a totalitarian state where violence and fear were constants, where mail and other "private" writing was sometimes read by the authorities and used against the writer, and where the

wrong sentiment expressed to the wrong person could result in jail, torture or even death. The students were afraid that the journals would be used to spy on them, perhaps even to punish them, when they returned home. Instead of building rapport, the writing had sown fear and distrust.

Two days after hearing of this experience, I read an article by a black South African teacher (Seme 1988) arguing that dialogue journals would not work with black students in South Africa for a similar reason: they could never be sure that whatever they wrote might not be used against them later.

Of course, to every "rule" come apparent exceptions. I know one American teacher, a white woman, who has used dialogue journals in South Africa with black teacher trainees. She found them to be highly successful as a forum for discussion of pedagogy. She believes, however, that this was the result of an implicit understanding between herself and the students about what could and could not be discussed, allowing for productive exchanges on the "safe" subject of teaching techniques. Even in this notoriously totalitarian state, then, there was a kind of trust, a mutual understanding which allowed some productive use to be made of the journals.

There's really no way around it--successful dialogue writing requires trust. And when the writing is open-ended with regard to topic, as is usually true, students "must

know that their writing is safe from authority figures and peers," in the words of Joy Kreeft (Kreeft, Staton and Gutstein 1984, 2). In situations precluding that kind of trust or free expression, the nature of the dialogue can be altered radically. It is likely to be less open and personal, and it may lose much of it's power to engage and to teach. It may even, as these examples show, have precisely the opposite of its intended effect.

KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN--THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER PATIENCE

Dialogue journals don't work well, or quickly, with all students. Some may require a long time before the writing seems to "work," while others simply never seem to take to the practice.

The first time I used dialogue journals, I asked students to write in them at home. At first, everyone did. But some wrote only occasionally, and a few stopped altogether. When I asked why they weren't participating, the abstainers offered a rich array of reasons. Basically, I thought, they all seemed firmly resistant, afraid, or simply unconvinced.

The next time I did the journals, I asked students to write in them three times a week, during class. I soon learned that while writing in class takes care of non-compliance, it doesn't guarantee success. As Joy Peyton and Leslee Reed have found with children (Peyton & Reed, 1988),

some adults just don't ever do well with the technique, for one reason or another. Certain students seem to resist getting truly engaged, while others write in shallow, repetitive patterns that don't seem to mean much. Still others have a very difficult time finding suitable topics. One adult student told me that his biggest problem was "Not knowing what to write about, (since) there were no perimeters placed on topic."

I won't attempt a detailed discussion here of ways to address these problems. These and other practical issues, such as how to introduce journal writing to students, are best treated in a separate manual. Fortunately, such a manual is being written by Joy Peyton and Leslee Reed (1987), and should soon be available to the public.

I will, however, make one observation. One of the most important ingredients, it seems, for successful journal writing, particularly with students who seem resistant or unable to engage with in dialogue, is teacher patience. I've certainly found this to be true in my own teaching.

Ting, whose written dialogue with Kathleen we saw in Chapter Two (page 22), is a wonderful case in point. She started out so concerned with errors that she only wrote stilted, though perfect, sentences. For almost two months her entries were correct and dull. But the door was kept open, as first I and then Kathleen continued to write with sincere interest. At some point, the barriers were lowered

and her entire relationship to the written language and to her teachers opened up dramatically.

Don't ever shut the door on dialogue, I would say, for it may be just around the corner.

CONCLUSION

> Life is not anything; it is only the opportunity for something.
>
> --Christian Friedrich Hebbel

Dialogue journals, to paraphrase Christian Hebbel, are not anything; they are only the opportunity for many things.

Like life, dialogue journals offer no guarantees. If done with commitment and honesty, however, they open wide doors to new growth for both student and teacher.

The customary hierarchy of most classrooms all too often discourages students and teachers from communicating openly with one other. Dialogue journals represent a entirely different approach, an alternate path to new understanding and rapport between teachers and students.

With openness comes vulnerability, however, and so the interaction relies on trust--trust between teacher and student not to violate the privacy of the dialogue, and implicit trust in the mutual sincerity of what is said. With that trust in place, the dialogue can blossom. And in the process, students can become so thoroughly engaged in the writing that they lose their fear and make real strides towards new identities as writers in their second language.

Dialogue journals may simply enhance other aspects of a teacher's approach, or they can become the centerpiece of one's pedagogy. In either case, however, they can never

entirely replace other strategies, such as the teaching of specific grammar points or particular formal writing skills. Dialogue journals are of most value as part of an overall package, an important piece of an enhanced whole.

Perhaps the single greatest gift a "dialogue" teacher can bestow on students is love. The students know that the teacher cares enough to write personally to them, over and over again. This feeling--love--is sadly missing from all too many schools and classrooms throughout this country and the world. With greater dialogue, that can someday change.

This brings to mind once again the words of Leslee Reed, who pioneered what we now call dialogue journal writing, and who expresses so clearly what the practice means to her:

> The feeling that I care for you and you care for me has to be there; it has to be there in school. The people who say that a good teacher doesn't get emotionally involved with students are missing something very important. The first step is to be warm, personal and friendly--you have to be emotionally involved with those whom you work and those whom you teach. You have to love them, each one of them. (Staton et al 1988, 71)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Axelrod, Linda Mae. 1985. The letter writing technique. M.A.T. Thesis, School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

Bruner, Jerome. 1988. Foreword to Dialogue journal communication: Classroom, linguistic, social and cognitive views, by Staton et al. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing.

Coffey, Margaret Pogmiller. 1987. Communication through writing. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Curran, Charles. 1976. Counseling learning in second languages. Apple River, Ill., Apple River Press.

Davis, Frances. 1983. Why you call me emigrant?: Dialogue journal writing with migrant youth. Childhood Education 60 (November/December): 110-116.

Elbow, Peter. 1985. The shifting relationships between speech and writing. College Composition and Communication 36 (October) 283-303.

Fillmore, Charles. 1979. On fluency. Chapter in Individual differences in language ability and language behavior, ed. C. Fillmore et al, 85-101. New York: Academic Press.

Gutstein, Shelley P. 1987. Toward the assessment of communicative competence in writing: An analysis of the dialogue journal writing of japanese adult ESL students. Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University.

Hall, Nigel and Rose Duffy. 1987. Every child has a story to tell. Language Arts 64 (September): 523-529.

Krashen, Steven. 1982. Principles and practice in second language acquisition. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Kreeft, Joy. 1983. Students' views of dialogue journals; 'You are less feeling afraid.' Dialogue 1 (April): 3.

Kreeft, Joy. 1984. Dialogue writing--Bridge from talk to essay writing. Language Arts 61 (February): 141-150.

Kreeft, Joy, Jana Staton and Shelly Gutstein. 1984. What is dialogue? Dialogue 2 (January): 1

Kreeft, Joy, Roger Shuy, Jana Staton, Leslee Reed, and Robby Morroy. 1984. Dialogue writing: Analysis of student-teacher interactive writing in the learning of English as a Second Language. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics (under NIE-G-83-0030) (ERIC Document Reproduction Service no. ED 252 097).

Long, Michael. 1983. Native speaker/nonnative speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. Applied Linguistics 4: 126-141.

Lindfors, Judith Wells. 1988. From "talking together" to "being together in talk." Language Arts 65 (2): 135-141.

Michael, Becky, ed. 1982. Some applications of DJ's. Dialogue I (April): 3-6.

Morroy, Robby. 1985. Teacher strategies: linguistic devices for sustaining interaction in dialogue journal writing. Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University.

Peyton, Joy Kreeft, and Mulugetta Seyoum. 1988. The effect of teacher strategies on student's interactive writing: the case of dialogue journals. Center for Language Education and Research, University of California, Los Angeles.

Peyton, Joy Kreeft. 1986. Interactive writing: Making writing meaningful for language minority students. NABE News 10 (Fall): 19-21.

Peyton, Joy Kreeft and Leslee Reed. 1987. Dialogue journal writing with Limited English Proficient students: a handbook for teachers. Center for Language Education and Research. Unpublished manuscript.

Peyton, Joy Kreeft, Jana Staton, Gina Richardson and Walt Wolfram. 1988. Beyond writing assignments: the influence of communicative context on ESL students' writing. Paper presented at the Twenty-second Annual TESOL Convention. March 8-13. Chicago, Illinois.

Pfingstag, Nancy. 1984. Showing writing: modeling the process. TESOL NEWSLETTER XVIII (February; Supplement No. 1): 1-3.

Poole, Diane. 1988. Dialogue journal writing with a language associate. Dialogue V (April): 3-4.

Raimes, Ann. 1986. Exploring through writing: A process approach to ESL Composition. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Seme, P.J. Nomathemba. 1988. A black South African perspective on dialogue journals in a mother tongue language. Dialogue V (April): 5-7.

Shuy, Roger. 1980. Developing writing dialogue out of speech dialogue. Paper presented at the NCTE National Arts Conference, San Antonio, Texas.

Shuy, Roger. 1979. Research currents: Dialogue as the heart of learning. Language Arts 64 (8): 890-897.

Shuy, Roger. 1982. Some applications of DJ's--college/graduate school. Dialogue 1 (April): 5

Shuy, Roger. 1988. Sentence level language functions. Chapter 6 in Dialogue journal communication: Classroom, linguistic, social and cognitive views, edited by Jana Staton, Roger Shuy, Joy Kreeft Peyton and Leslee Reed, 107-142. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing.

Staton, Jana. 1981. Literacy as an interactive process. The Linguistic Reporter 24 (October): 1-5.

Staton, Jana, ed. 1983. Students' views of dialogue journals. Dialogue 1 (April): 1-6.

Staton, Jana. 1985. Using dialogue journals for developing thinking, reading, and writing with hearing impaired students. The Volta Review 7 (September):127-154.

Staton, Jana and Joy Peyton. 1986. A recent history of dialogue journals. Preface to Dialogue, Vol. 1 Newsletters from 1982-1986. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Staton, Jana. 1987. The power of responding in dialogue journals, Chap. 5 in The journal book, ed. Toby Fulwiler. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, div. of Heinemann.

Staton, Jana, Joy Kreeft Peyton and Shelley Gutstein, eds. 1986. Focus on the teacher: Benefits, strategies, time. Dialogue III (December): 1-9.

Staton, Jana, Joy Kreeft Peyton and Shelley Gutstein, eds. 1988. Dialogue journals in international settings. Dialogue V (April): 1-19.

Staton, Jana, Roger Shuy, Joy Kreeft Peyton, and Leslee Reed. 1988. Dialogue journal communication: Classroom, linguistic, social and cognitive views. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing.

Steer, Jocelyn. 1988. Dialogue journal writing for academic purposes. Paper presented at the 1988 TESOL National Convention, Chicago, Illionois. March 12, 1988.

Turitz, Nina. 1982. Dialogue journals in adult ESL programs. Dialogue I (2): 5-6.

END

U.S. Dept. of Education

Office of Education
Research and
Improvement (OERI)

ERIC

Date Filmed

March 29, 1991